

A
S H O R T V I E W

O F T H E

Scotland
Last General Assembly, *k*

W H I C H M E T

In the Month of May, MDCC LXXII.

In a L E T T E R to a F R I E N D.

I N T E N D E D

To show that the Friends of LIBERTY, and of our valuable CONSTITUTION, have no Reason to be dispirited by the Proceedings of that Assembly, but on the Contrary, have great Encouragement to continue their Diligence and to redouble their Efforts for its Preservation and Support.

G L A S G O W :

Printed in the Year MDCCCLXXII.



A SHORT VIEW
OF THE LAST

General Assembly, &c.

DEAR SIR,

I HAVE received your most acceptable Letter, wherein you tell me that some of the friends of religion and liberty, are not a little discouraged with the majority that appeared in last Assembly, for continuing those destructive measures which have been so long complained of in this church, that they begin to think it vain to continue the struggle any longer, and that nothing is left to us but to deplore our unhappy situation, and to pray to the Great Head of the church to arise and plead the cause that is his own.

I AM glad however, to observe that you my Friend, are not among those pusillanimous people, that you have so strongly imbibed the maxim of that celebrated Roman, Quintus Fabius: and even doubt if the procedure of last Assembly has furnished sufficient grounds for the complaints you have heard. As you have been pleased to lay your commands on me, to give you a short and impartial account of the most material transactions of that Assembly, chiefly with a view to the in-

formation of those who have been dispirited by the reports that have gone abroad concerning it ; I cannot but approve of so laudable a motive, and should have reason to condemn myself if I did not contribute all my power to the satisfaction of those I have so great a regard for : without objecting my unfitness for the task or desiring you to lay it on others, I shall endeavour to comply with your request, whereby I shall at least have the pleasure to shew you how ready I am at all times to obey your commands.

THE last Assembly opened with a new and refined stroke of policy ; the leaders of that faction which have so long triumphed in our General Assemblies, call it the *Court Party*, or what you will, had observed with no small concern that the opposition to their measures was year after year, gaining ground, and that there was reason to fear a total overthrow of their influence, unless some new and bold efforts were made to preserve it : with this view they turned their attention to the Royal Boroughs, which by the constitution of our church have a right to be represented in our General Assemblies, they well knew that many of the *smaller Burghs* had seldom any representatives in the Assembly and for a very good reason, because their funds could not well support a member during the sitting of the Assembly, and they had few men among themselves who could defray their own expences, the plan therefore was to make application to those small burghs, the affairs of which are generally conducted by court influence, and such influence they have always at command, the only difficulty was to find proper per-

sons in and about Edinburgh to represent these burghs. It therefore became necessary to have new elders CREATED on purpose to serve this jobb, ministers in the country, friendly to their views, were applied to, to ordain such and such persons elders in their sessions, though they had no interest or residence in the parishes where they were so ordained: this scheme was put in practice, to the great scandal and reproach of such kirk sessions as thereby became the dupes of this party, it is affirmed, and I do believe on good grounds, that fourteen or fifteen such elders have been ordained since the Assembly 1771; our rulers being thus provided sent out their emissaries to these venal burghs, with orders to elect as their representatives to the Assembly, *The gentlemen they were pleased to recommend to them.* Their orders were punctually obeyed though not without considerable opposition in some burghs, where there appeared a respectable body of men to testify against the slavish disposition of the majority: however secretly this infamous traffic was carried on, it came to perspire, when these burgh commissions were laid before the respective presbyteries, to be attested. Some of them hesitated, others refused to attest the commissions of gentlemen who were entire strangers to them and of whose qualifications to be members of Assembly they were totally ignorant; some presbyteries refused upon this ground chiefly, because the Commissioner had been ordained an elder in a parish where he had never resided, and whose ordination was on that account thought to be illegal and invalid: these machinations when they came to be known, gave just occasion of scandal and offence in many parts of the

country, insomuch that four synods and three presbyteries sent overtures to the assembly complaining of this unwarrantable practice and entreating them to put an effectual stop to it.

It was necessary, my Friend, when entering on the proceedings of the Assembly 1772, to acquaint you, with this piece of history, that you may see the wretched shifts our opponents are now put to, to preserve their majority and influence in this court, and be able to judge whether a party can long subsist that must have recourse to such methods as these.

WHEN the commissions of the several members were laid according to custom before the clerks, whose province it is to make up the roll of Assembly. It was obvious that eight or ten of the borough commissions wanted the presbyteries attestations, and therefore the commissioners ought not in justice to have been enrolled till the Assembly had given judgment on the reasons of the presbyteries refusal. But our clerks were pleased to make a rule to themselves, and enrolled them all upon the frivolous pretence that they had observed there were protestations entered against the presbyteries refusal. But who gave them a power to judge and condemn in the first instance, the conduct of any presbytery, and to admit persons to vote in the choice of a Moderator; this is the necessary effect of *their* inrollment who in the judgment of such presbytery want the necessary qualifications.

THIS conduct of the clerks indeed occasioned some debate but as the Assembly is not supposed

to be constituted till the new Moderator is chosen, according to this idea, there was not yet a court to judge whether they had done right or wrong, and therefore they stood on the roll till the Moderator was chosen, and the whole commissions referred to be revised by the proper committee.

THE vote for the Moderator carried for our opponents by a majority of 27, a much greater majority than ever they had in any subsequent question, which shows how difficult it was for them to keep their friends together, and no wonder, when men come up not from any liking to assembly business, but merely to serve particular purposes. The two first diets of business were spent on the constitution of the court, and in judging of the validity of the contested commissions, one of these cases in particular was the subject of a long and warm debate, it was the commission of the burgh of Dumfries, the presbytery had refused to attest it because it did not appear to them that there was sufficient evidence of the commissioners being qualified in terms of the acts of Assembly. The presbyteries conduct was supported by a manly and spirited speech from a very young member who perhaps had never opened his mouth in an assembly before, it carried however, to sustain the commission and to find that the presbyteries conduct was injurious and unwarranted both to the burgh and the commissioner, it was this last part of the sentence that occasioned the great length of the debate, and a strong dissent to be entered against it. The other disputed commissions were more easily sustained, in respect of favourable circumstances in them, and that the

friends of liberty were willing to wait the issue of the overture, to disqualify elders for the future who should be ordained in places where they had no interest or residence.

MANY cases of the settlement of ministers came before this Assembly, and were determined by them. But by none of their decisions, was the interest of religion greatly affected except by one, I mean the cause of Kinglassie in Fifeshire. There was a presentation supported by a number of non-residing heritors whilst almost the whole elders and congregation reclaimed. This indeed was a trial of strength between the two parties, and the first that occurred during the sitting of the Assembly: each side exerted themselves to the utmost, and when it came to a question it carried for the presentee only by nine votes. See, my Friend, what the boasted majority came to, when the interest of religion was nearly concerned, how small a matter would have turned the balance, one single presbytery represented by five or six members, taken from the one side and added to the other, was sufficient for the purpose. This decision is not surely any ground of dejection but rather affords ample encouragement to continue the struggle, in hopes of preventing such destructive measures altogether. Besides, it is hard to say, when this settlement will take place, unless there shall happen a considerable alteration in the dispositions of the people concerned. Presbyteries are not now in the humour of executing sentences carried by a small majority of a General Assembly, when such settlements would scatter whole congregations and our oponents dare not venture

to enforce them by pains and penalties. The deposition of Mr. Gillespie cost them too dear to attempt such a measure again ; for it is more than probable, that one other instance of like severity, would overset them all altogether and bring about a total destruction of their influence, it is accordingly somewhat remarkable, that the present administration is so feeble, that for five years past, they have not been able to put out of court, a single cause of a violent settlement where the presbytery was in opposition. Glendovan is dropt and will no more be heard of. St. Ninians continued still unexecuted and probably would have remained so, for years to come, had it not been made up by a happy compromise.

BUT, my Friend, though the decision in the cause of Ringlassie was in the spirit of those destructive measures that have been so long and justly complained of, yet it was the only one that has stained the reputation of the last Assembly, I must now turn your attention to their proceedings in other causes of settlements which I hope will clearly illustrate the point I aim at, that the friends of liberty and of our happy constitution have no reason to be discouraged by the actings of the Assembly, so far from it, that they have great reason to continue their diligence and to be persuaded that they do not contend in a hopeless cause :

When the cause of St. Ninians was mentioned in the report of the committee of bills and a diet appointed for it, a motion was made for a committee to meet with the parties concerned, in hopes that the affair might be accommodated.

The motion was accordingly gone into, and it seems the committee found their business so easy, that they finished it at one meeting, for they were ready next morning to make their report, which was received and read, importing that the patron, presbytery and all concerned had agreed on a plan, whereby Mr. Thomson's settlement was to take effect on or before the 20th of November next. The Assembly without hesitation, unanimously approved of the report, and thereby preserved to the church a large and extensive parish consisting of more than 7000 souls, threatened to be cut off from it by a most violent settlement: this plan was understood to be this, that the parish is to be provided in an ordained assistant *agreeable to them*, whose settlement is to take place immediately, or soon after Mr. Thomson's; and here let it be observed to the honour of the patron of St. Ninians, that in this compromise he acted in a manner that justly entitles him to the gratitude of this church and of every one that thinks the office of a minister is to instruct the congregation, and that a minister without a congregation is the most absurd and pernicious solecism.

THE cause of Aberfoill was decided in a manner that would have reflected honour upon any assembly in the purest times of our church, the patron of that parish had presented a candidate who was totally ignorant of the Gallic language. The people being Highlanders, were almost universally against him on that account: it is very observable, that through the influence of the noble patron, the people of Abberfoill had been induced about forty years ago to accept of a minister who

had not the language so as to be able to preach in it ; from that time till very lately had they laboured under this intolerable grievance. The presbytery of Dumblain too, from what motives I know not, had found and declared Aberfoill to be a Lowland or English parish. But the presumption of its being a Highland parish appeared so strong, to the commission of Assembly 1771, that they appointed the presbytery of Dumblain, joined by two or three Highland ministers from other presbyteries, to examine into the state of the parish with respect to this fact, and report. Their report was laid before last Assembly, from which it evidently appeared, that Aberfoill was a Highland parish, and that a very inconsiderable number of them could receive any benefit by ordinances dispensed in the English language. But however clear this case was, the leaders of the court party, strongly supported the presentee, and no doubt expected their usual backing ; but the justice of the Assembly prevailed over all their efforts : for when the question was put, it carried by a majority of more than two to one, to reject the presentation and to find the presentee unqualified, in regard he possessed not the Gallic language.

THE leaders appeared thunder-struck with this decision. It proved however, an instructive lesson to them, for when a cause perfectly similar to this ; the settlement of Kirkhill in Rosshire came before the commission, fearing such a defeat as they had experienced in the affair of Aberfoill, they took the lead in this question and insisted as much as any for *rejecting* even a *Royal Presentation*, and disqualifying the presentee, which accordingly was done unanimously, and without a vote. This was

a proof of their weakness. The want of Gallic they would have treated as lightly as they do the want of a call, if they had numbers to support them.

SAY then, my Friend, if the last Assembly has not done some good things, and given the friends of liberty great encouragement to maintain the struggle against unconstitutional settlements.

BUT I have something further to present to your view, no countenance or protection was given by this Assembly to immoral clergymen, you well know what noise decisions of this kind in former Assemblies have made in every corner of this church, and what grief of heart they have occasioned to all the friends of religion; but the last Assembly were so far from adding to the affliction of good men from this cause, that they have contributed to their joy and consolation. One cause of this kind fell under their consideration. The parish of Port-Patrick in Galloway, had libelled a preacher for gross crimes, who had been presented to be their minister. The presbytery had found the libel relevant and proven, and in consequence, had unanimously deprived him of his licence: the defender had taken two appeals one from their judgment finding a relevancy, and another from their refusal to give judgment in his cause, before the whole proof was concluded: the proof was published, consisting of more than seventy pages, and contained a scene of the blackest villiany: but in regard the defender had not presented his appeals regularly, the Assembly without entering upon the cause, unanimously found the presbyteries sentence to be final, and thus shut the door against that unhappy man and prevented his being obtruded

on any parish as their minister. Look back, my Friend, to the cases of Nisbet and Lyell, see how long those scandalous characters were protected, by a branch of this party that has brought our church to such disgrace and danger. See the civil arm taking hold of the former, and banishing him the kingdom while yet he sustained the character of a minister of the gospel; you have not surely forgot the names of Mann, Darymple, Carson, Stewart, and several others who all met with undue protection from our supreme judicature. But now, how happy the alteration, and what is this owing to, believe it my Friend, it is entirely owing to the spirit which such arbitrary and unconstitutional measures has raised among the members of the church; parties are now so balanced, that such proceedings dare not be attempted, knowing that it would throw the majority to the other side. But if ever this spirit subside and the friends of the constitution slacken their diligence, it requires but a small share of the spirit of prophecy to foresee, that the same measures will be revived and pushed to the greatest lengths.

You will now expect to hear of the success of the overtures concerning elders ordained in parishes where they have no residence, and perhaps your expectations are not very high from an Assembly where there was such a majority, and a majority chiefly made up of elders of this stamp. Allow me then to acquaint you, that this overture which as I said came from four synods and three presbyteries, was remitted by the committee for overtures, to the consideration of a small sub committee, as the Moderator was not friendly to our views he took care to name very few of our friends;

however, one or two of our principal men were upon it. In this sub committee it was debated: Various were the opinions concerning it, a majority were for dropping it altogether; but at length a happy proposal was made, in which they all agreed, that they should overture to their constituents that complaints had been made of the irregular ordination of some elders, but that the matter not being sufficiently digested it was not yet ripe for an overture from the General Assembly, but that they should remit this subject to the several presbyteries to be materially considered by them, and to report their opinion thereanent to the next Assembly. This was all that could be expected, and will have much the same effect with the transmission of an overture concerning it, to this motion the Assembly unanimously agreed.

WHEN I mention the committee of overtures, I cannot omit to inform you of a very curious and important motion that was made there. A brother got up and told he had an overture to propose, and then read a pretty long paper, but as we only heard it once, I cannot give you a distinct detail of it: however it was to this purpose, Whereas ignorant and illiterate elders took upon them to judge of the trials of candidates for the ministry, some method should be taken by the Assembly to prevent this evil. A feeble attempt was made to support it, by two of the principal speakers on the other side, one of whom had so much good sense to object to the harsh and indecent terms of *ignorant* and *illiterate elders*, wherewith it was introduced. But it was received with so much indignation by our friends as a direct attempt to alter and infringe our constitution, that

the member who proposed it stood up again and withdrew his overture. Such was the fate of a proposal that cut deeper than any thing that was mentioned, during the sitting of this Assembly: it was easy to see that this motion was chiefly intended as an introduction to other and more important alterations in the frame of our church policy; we were no strangers to the schemes that have been hatching in some parts of our country to make innovations with respect to the subscription of formulas and tests of orthodoxy, and therefore it must be highly dangerous to loose the smallest pin by which our admired constitution is preserved in firmness and vigour.

I must also take notice of another overture that came from the presbytery of Perth, of very considerable importance to the interest of religion and the credit of the ministerial character. The design of it was to obtain an act of Assembly to prevent students in divinity from slipping out of the kingdom and procuring a licence to preach the gospel, from some class, or small society of dissenting ministers in England, without proper certificates from the presbyteries where they have their ordinary residence. The occasion of this overture, was an application of a young man to that presbytery to be admitted a probationer in their bounds, on the production of a licence so obtained, the presbytery refused to grant his desire, because he could produce no certificate from any presbytery, that he had studied divinity the usual time, and was otherwise qualified to enter on trials for preaching the gospel. The committee paid great attention to this overture, it evidently appeared to them that the practice com-

plained of was becoming very frequent, and had a tendency to introduce among us ignorant and illiterate candidates for the ministry, and therefore they agreed to overture to the Assembly, that they should strictly prohibit all students in divinity to go into England, or any other country with a view to obtain a licence, without proper certificates from some presbytery of this church, where they were known, and to declare that every such licence obtained on any other terms shall be void and null. This seasonable and important overture the Assembly unanimously approved of, and passed into an act.

THUS, Sir, I have endeavoured to recollect the most material transactions of the Assembly 1772, I acknowledge they had several other causes before them, both with respect to settlements and other matters, but as their decisions in those causes were either not final, or the interest of religion were less affected by them, I did not chuse to swell this letter any further, or give you the trouble of a detail of them, the whole I submit to your judgment, with the conclusions to be drawn from such premises, and have little reason to doubt but you will agree with me in opinion that the friends of our happy constitution have no cause of dejection from the proceeding of the last Assembly, but rather great encouragement to unite their most vigorous endeavours and steadily to persevere in supporting the good cause of Religion and Liberty, whereby they will certainly keep in awe, if not finally overcome a party which otherwise, would speedily overwhelm this church in disgrace and ruin.

I ever am with great regard, &c.

11 JY 63
F I N I S.